

FOREWORD

Daniel Boorstin, the eminent historian and Librarian of Congress, said it well in a work called *Hidden History*. "Our past is only a little less uncertain than our future," he wrote, "and, like the future, it is always changing, always revealing and concealing."

Silent Coup is the excavation of some vital hidden history, of a national scandal within a scandal, and of a literary-journalistic atrocity of revealing while concealing.

There are several virtues that make this book quite remarkable among political writing of our era. What follows is a finely styled, fast-paced narrative, gripping as it is disturbing. Distinguished from so much written about Watergate and Richard Nixon, it also happens to be true.

You are about to read the story of a coup d'état, of all political events the most dramatic, suspenseful, sinister. To make the subject even more ominous, this is an American coup, albeit carried out (for a change) in the United States itself.

The means and methods are appropriate to the setting. No conspirators steal away to some secret command post. No tanks crouch among the tree-shaded streets behind the Capitol. We are witnessing the classically American genus of the coup d'état, achieved by folly as well as cunning, by commercial calculus and public relations, by both the manipulation of institutions and their own craven abdication, by cold intention and no little inadvertence, and—perhaps most essential—at no sacrifice of the popular mythology. (A distinguishing mark of the American coup is that it should remain concealed from its victims and history even *after* its successful execution.)

Among several dimensions, this book is a portrait of Richard Milhous Nixon. Of many remarkable United States presidents in this century, he remains in many respects the most intriguing, seemingly the most elusive. He emerges in these pages as a tortured, torturing man of historic paradox. A kind of political prodigy, Mr. Nixon is in many ways a misfit in public life. Widely respected and widely

abhorred, he appears here as a statesman coasting to reelection, yet a politician lethally anxious about his place and future. Most important for purposes of the coup, he has been strikingly adept at concentrating power and sometimes almost magisterial in its use, yet strangely inept in understanding the inner realities of government, feebly unable to cope with the supreme crisis of his own removal.

Even those who know well the provenance of Richard Nixon will find in this book an unexpected figure. His rise, it is true, gave premonition of his fall. But no other portrayal has provided us such a gritty, authentic montage of the tottering ruler, the old predator at bay. It is this president—the would-be visionary, the punitive and the pathetic—very much as he was. That he was never seen so clearly at the time, viewed through the lens of other ambitions, other reckonings of power, is part of the considerable revelation of *Silent Coup*.

Yet the following pages are far more than a major contribution to the history of the American presidency—though that would be enough. Above all, this is a book about a larger reality of government and politics in the United States.

Mr. Nixon himself has been fond of saying that history if not historians would somehow vindicate him, that most of the first scathing verdicts on his regime have come from those whom he dismisses with that old sneer as “on the left.” Like his fitful grasp of governance, his sense of what really happened to him turns out to be sadly superficial, and ironic. As *Silent Coup* shows so compellingly, Watergate was acted out—and its early ersatz history dictated, as it were—by those of far more reactionary views, and by some far closer to the Oval Office.

Nothing, in fact, was quite what it seemed, from spies in gold braid to the manipulation of a presidential pardon, from the chaotic White House cover-up to the matching confusion and concealment of Congress and the prosecutors. Even the famous break-in itself was born of an urge still seedier than party espionage. In a sense, an American president was toppled by the world's oldest profession.

Not least—and this much Mr. Nixon may yet come to appreciate—the regime was replaced because of its policies as well as its squalid politics. However petty the maneuvers, there was grim substance to this coup d'état. One of its purposes was not only to rid us of an awkward leader and his extra-Constitutional excursions, but in the first instance to check some unwanted statesmanship, and thus to maintain a prescribed course for America and the world.

As the hidden history of Watergate unfolds in *Silent Coup*, there seems little doubt about the base motives of the participants. One is tempted to blame much on power and greed. The Joint Chiefs of Staff

and their agents-in-place had authority and appropriations at stake. Reporters with laggard or uncertain careers, publishers hungry for industry sensation and profits, bureaucrats behaving bureaucratically—all, in a way, are recognizable. There is something fetid in the released odor, personal aggrandizement, dishonesty, and corruption as old as the Republic.

Yet what became decisive in the end was relatively modern, the stunning superficiality of Washington's political culture in this last half of the American Century. Events depended upon the absence or subversion of what the Founders trusted rather hopefully to be the guardians—the press, the Congress, and Judiciary. Washington's journalists of the 1970s were no more co-opted than their predecessors, and in some ways less so than the snap-brimmed barkers of an earlier era who took their leaks whole from J. Edgar Hoover or flush, back-slapping senators. But their chemistry in Watergate was typically banal: a conspiracy of accepted convention, a conjunction of careers, the arrogance, presumption, and opportunism of an insular capital.

Messrs. Colodny and Gettlin perform no black magic in righting the record. What they do is a meticulous and thoughtful weighing of the evidence, almost all of it available at the time to enterprising reporters, or to subsequent scholars and investigators, most of whom glided languidly past. It was—and has been—a cruel hoax to pretend that the most powerful institutions of the media did not have the wherewithal to uncover this story, not to mention the train of putative historians and writers who have rehearsed the fiction since. The result has been an American version of *treason of the clerks*, nothing less than a Constitutional betrayal of trust.

The implications have been far-reaching. Reputations and fortunes were made. Books and movies were confected. A generation of students stood inspired by discreet fraud. Reaction and machination passed blithely as the legitimate Constitutional process. A government was overthrown not in the clear light of democratic day—where its abuses might have compelled its recall anyway—but in the shadows of myth and factional intrigue. Public ignorance, democracy's lethal draft, was served and drunk.

There was indispensable common ground on which the players met, hunters and prey alike. Each was still in the grip of the great national security myth of postwar America, the whole elaborate construct of power and patriotism, fear and ignorance, that has so manacled governance—until, in end-of-the-century America, a sentient public scarcely exists. *Silent Coup* lists no “military party” of plotting colonels and generals, at least in the crude caricatures in which we

usually prefer to view them. But it does reveal a formidable *national security party*, civilian and uniformed, Republican and Democrat, that governs when it chooses, whenever it believes it must. (It is in the process once again in the wake of the Persian Gulf war—incredibly with some of the same techniques and mouthpieces—of foisting off a fresh mythology of power and personality.)

This book will not rescue Richard Nixon from posterity, not salvage the reputations of his men. Nor will it confirm with its real-life complexity Mr. Nixon's own demonology of partisan or ideological animus. But in its sheer authenticity it retrieves something invaluable for the rest of us. The ultimate price of the coup was to defraud a nation of its past, its one true and common patrimony. Colodny and Gettlin are giving back what was stolen.

The revelations here are a coming to terms with what we have been, and thus are becoming—an anguishing self-examination of the kind our old rivals are now conducting from Berlin to Moscow, from the Katyn Forest to the graveyards of the Gulag. Hiding history was the common scourge of the Cold War, plaguing winners no less than losers. And from the cost of such national distortion in hypocrisy and political, moral decay, there has been no real escape on either side. The reclaiming of America's democracy, like the birth of other's, begins with telling the truth.

That is why *Silent Coup* is not only history, but a fateful current event—a precious omen, Boorstin would say, of "how much still remains to be discovered about our past, and how uncertain is our grip on the future."

—ROGER MORRIS